


RESEARCH ARTICLE

# China's evolving security engagement in Africa: Policies, strategies, and implications

Georg Lammich 

Institute of Political Science, University Duisburg-Essen, Duisburg, Germany  
Email: [Georg.Lammich@uni-due.de](mailto:Georg.Lammich@uni-due.de)

(Received 26 August 2024; revised 14 December 2024; accepted 6 January 2025)

## Abstract

This paper examines China's evolving security engagement in Africa, focusing on the recent shifts in policy and strategy as China's global influence expands. By employing a multi-dimensional research approach, including fieldwork with semi-structured interviews, and a thorough analysis of official Chinese documents, the study highlights key examples from Tanzania, Ethiopia, and the African Union. China's security engagement is characterised by a dual strategy of hard and soft security measures, including military presence, arms transfers, and diplomatic initiatives. The research identifies a significant transition from primarily economic-focused interactions to a more nuanced strategy that incorporates military cooperation and diplomatic interventions. This shift reflects China's response to the complex geopolitical dynamics within Africa and its broader ambitions on the global stage. While still largely state-centric, China's engagement is beginning to adopt more assertive security strategies, driven by the need to protect its investments and citizens in conflict-prone regions, as well as to position itself as a responsible global actor in peace and security. Despite these developments, China's approach remains cautious and reactive, constrained by its policy principles and the complexities of African geopolitics.

**Keywords:** Africa; China; diplomacy; military cooperation; security

## Introduction

Following the perceived rise of China as a global power, research on China's foreign relations has been dominated by the question of whether the People's Republic of China (PRC) will act as a disruptor or as a responsible great power that abides by international norms and standards. While China's economic and infrastructure investments have been welcomed by many in sub-Saharan Africa, its engagement has been marked by a number of differences with Western norms and approaches, which has led to a contested narrative around its activities on the continent.

Publications on China's trade and economic relations with the African continent and their developmental impact have therefore proliferated. In recent years, the PRC has begun to adjust its foreign strategy and professionalise its foreign diplomacy, and its security engagement has become more prominent. The increased role that the PRC has assumed in many African states has raised new questions and puzzles concerning geopolitical and security cooperation that require further theoretical reflection and empirical analysis. For many years, the basic principles and direction of China's Africa policy seemed clear. Although shrouded in secrecy and policy opacity, the norms, objectives, and trends of China's engagement on the continent were agreed upon by most scholars

of the subject. Many of these apparent certainties have recently been called into question, however. China's evolving foreign policy, geopolitical and domestic power shifts, and post-pandemic economic prospects have led to a reassessment of its activities in Africa. The patterns of Chinese economic and political activity on the continent have been changed by stagnating or declining infrastructure financing, growing awareness among African governments of the risks of heavy borrowing from Chinese lenders, and a strategic reassessment of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This paper specifically focuses on recent developments in China's security-related policies, strategies, and activities in sub-Saharan Africa. It highlights areas such as military cooperation, diplomatic interventions, contributions to regional peace operations, and other forms of military and security assistance. To identify China's main security-related activities and understand their purpose and significance, it is necessary to identify and examine the policies and strategies within which these activities are developed and conducted. Using key examples from Tanzania, Ethiopia, and the African Union (AU), the paper aims to provide a better understanding of how and why China is becoming an increasingly important actor in Africa's evolving security environment and how China's new security policies are shaping its engagement. The methodology of this study employs a comprehensive multifaceted approach to analyse the evolution of China's security-related engagement in Africa, integrating semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and a literature review. Our research began with conducting semi-structured interviews in Tanzania in spring 2023, and in Ethiopia during spring 2024, the latter also being the location of the African Union's headquarters. We engaged with policymakers, scholars, and experts on Sino-African relations, selecting a diverse range of perspectives on China's security impact in these countries and the region. In total, 112 individuals from various sectors – including government bodies, security-related institutions like defence academies, think-tanks, international organisations, media, academia, and the Chinese embassy – were approached, resulting in 36 completed interviews in Tanzania and 25 in Ethiopia. These participants were identified through online searches, referrals from local partners, and snowball sampling from earlier interviews, targeting those most knowledgeable about the dynamics of Sino-African cooperation. Given the topic's sensitivity, interviews with military or defence ministry personnel were often declined, and some participants chose not to permit recording or the use of their statements. Simultaneously, our document analysis included scrutinising official documents, policy statements, and speeches from Chinese and African sources. This included materials such as China's Global Security Initiative, white papers, and strategic security documents. Finally, an extensive literature review was conducted to situate our findings within the broader academic discourse on Chinese global security initiatives, international relations, and the evolving dynamics of China–Africa relations. This review helped frame our findings within established theoretical frameworks and identify gaps in the current understanding.

The three cases – Tanzania, Ethiopia, and the African Union – were chosen for various compelling reasons. Tanzania is generally considered one of the more politically stable countries in Africa. Since gaining independence in 1961, it has maintained a relatively peaceful political climate and has mostly avoided large-scale conflicts, especially compared to some of its neighbours that have experienced significant turmoil. Tanzania's relationship with China is among the strongest and longest-standing on the continent. Another long-term partner of China is Ethiopia, with relations dating back over 50 years. In stark contrast to Tanzania, however, Ethiopia has experienced severe conflicts, including the war against Eritrea, the Tigray conflict, and the Amhara war. Finally, the African Union focuses on China's approach towards interregional security arrangements.

### **China's evolving approach to security cooperation in Africa**

Research on China–Africa relations still suffers from a lack of theoretical coherence, over-generalised macro-perspectives, neglect of the multiple actors involved, and an overly Sinocentric

perspective.<sup>1</sup> Despite these criticisms, many aspects of China's engagement with Africa have been approached from a wide range of disciplines with numerous theoretical perspectives. More recently, the genuine political and security role of China on the African continent has also started to feature in academic publications.<sup>2</sup> These works have analysed the growing involvement of China in humanitarian intervention and United Nations (UN) peacekeeping, the political implications of arms transfers, security force assistance as part of great power competition, and the reactions to military coups on the continent.<sup>3</sup> This research indicates that China's growing economic prominence in Africa has been transformed into some political and military role, which requires a more explicit policy position and more specific political and military strategies to deal with the side effects of the PRC's own massive investments or the more contingent regime dynamics in many African states. Overall, China's security-related activities in Africa have expanded and diversified, reflecting its growing economic and political interests in the continent.

Security-related activities can be defined as activities that are used as instruments of foreign and security policy.<sup>4</sup> These activities can be broadly divided into two categories: conventional 'hard' security (e.g. military presence, arms transfers, military assistance and training of security forces, and military exchanges) and non-conventional 'soft' security such as diplomacy and development cooperation.<sup>5</sup> The security-related component of Africa's international relations has attracted much attention for a variety of reasons. Africa has been at the centre of global peace and security challenges for much of the post-Cold War period. A cursory glance at Africa's security landscape since the beginning of the 21st century reveals the extensive involvement of external actors in a catalogue of security-related activities across the continent, including funding, training, and assistance for the military apparatus of almost every African country; technical cooperation and support for regional security initiatives; participation in joint exercises; involvement in intelligence gathering and sharing; arms transfers; the deployment of troops and other personnel; and the establishment of a permanent military presence.

In studying China's security-related engagement, three theoretical strands, which are also dominant in International Relations (IR) studies, are most commonly applied. First, from a liberal perspective, China's emergence on the global stage offered an alternative to Western norms and institutions.<sup>6</sup> China's rise as a political lender to the Global South has challenged the existing

<sup>1</sup>Bhaso Ndzenze, 'On the lack of theory in Africa-China analysis', *Journal of International Affairs* (24 January 2019), available at: <https://jia.sipa.columbia.edu/news/lack-theory-africa-china-analysis>; Oscar M. Otele, 'Introduction. China-Africa relations: Interdisciplinary questions and theoretical perspectives', *The African Review*, 47:2 (2020), pp. 267-84 (p. 267).

<sup>2</sup>Chris Alden, Abiodun Alao, Zhang Chang, and Laura Barbers (eds), *China and Africa: Building Peace and Security Cooperation on the Continent* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Nele Noesselt and Christof Hartmann, *China's New Role in African Politics: From Non-Intervention towards Stabilization?* (London: Routledge, 2020).

<sup>3</sup>UN peacekeeping has been covered by Zhengyu Wu and Ian Taylor, 'From refusal to engagement: Chinese contributions to peacekeeping in Africa', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 29:2 (2011), pp. 137-54; Steven C. Y. Kuo, 'Chinese peace? An emergent norm in African peace operations', *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies*, 1:1 (2015), pp. 155-81; for political implications of arms transfers, see Ian Taylor and Zhengyu Wu, 'China's arms transfers to Africa and political violence', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 25:3 (2013), pp. 457-75; for security force assistance as part of great power competition, see Ilaria Carrozza and Nicholas J. Marsh, 'Great power competition and China's security assistance to Africa: Arms, training, and influence', *Journal of Global Security Studies*, 7:4 (2022), available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogac040>; and the reactions to military coups on the continent have been analysed by Jonathan Holslag, 'China and the coups: Coping with political instability in Africa', *Africa*, 110:440 (2012), pp. 367-86.

<sup>4</sup>Olawale Ismail and Elisabeth Sköns, *Security Activities of External Actors in Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>5</sup>Ismail and Sköns, *Security Activities of External Actors*, p. 12.

<sup>6</sup>George T. Yu, 'China, Africa, and globalization: The "China alternative"', Asia Paper Institute for Security and Development Policy (Stockholm, 2009); Oscar M. Otele, 'Introduction: China-Africa relations: Interdisciplinary questions and theoretical perspectives', *The African Review*, 47:2 (2020), pp. 267-84.

global aid and security architecture by offering a new set of ideas and practices and is beginning to influence the development and security agendas of many African states.<sup>7</sup> Second, social constructivism examines how China–Africa engagement has been shaped by identities and shared interests and constructed and reconstructed over time by actors acting under the influence of changing ideas and structural conditions.<sup>8</sup>

The third perspective is realism, which focuses primarily on China's national interests and sees its engagement as driven by economic and geostrategic motives. While this paper draws on all these perspectives to analyse China's security footprint in Africa, the realist approach seems to be the most compelling approach to explain China's security-related policies, strategies, and activities in sub-Saharan Africa. Gegout distinguishes four types of realist thinking: core realism, economic realism, normative realism, and ethical realism.<sup>9</sup> The following section discusses China's motives for security interventions based on these categories.

### Fear, money, and reputation

Regarding intervention, core realists would argue that it is rational for China to intervene in Africa if it helps shape the international environment in Beijing's favour and the costs, in terms of military and financial risks, remain relatively low. Additionally, intervention would be justified if it assists in protecting Chinese citizens during conflicts or safeguarding assets such as embassies or investments. Economic realists contend that states not only prioritise security but also seek economic gains. Therefore, intervention would be justified if it enhances China's economic power, even in the absence of a direct threat to national security or its citizens.<sup>10</sup> Prestige, encompassing reputation, credibility, and resolve, is often underestimated as a motivation for China to engage in security-related activities in situations that do not directly impact its security or economy. Prestige is derived from other states' subjective assessments of China's capabilities and its willingness to employ them.<sup>11</sup> Pursuing prestige in Africa serves as an instrument for China to demonstrate its power and enhance its bargaining power, reinforcing its foreign policy principles.<sup>12</sup>

Ethical intervention, although predominantly associated with a constructivist worldview, can also be considered within the realist framework. Realists allow for the possibility of intervention on moral grounds if it serves security and prestige interests.<sup>13</sup> While China has often been opposed to humanitarian intervention, its foreign policy is rooted in normative foundations that can justify security interventions from a Chinese perspective.<sup>14</sup> China's international legitimacy is increasingly linked to its involvement in civil conflicts and unstable regions. Given the ongoing conflicts in Libya, Ethiopia, Mali, South Sudan, and Sudan, China has recognised that it cannot remain detached from intrastate conflicts – even in areas where it lacks direct economic interests. This shift reflects rising expectations from the West and the affected regions themselves, urging China to get involved rather than maintaining a passive stance. A first significant instance of China

<sup>7</sup>Shaquille Ifedayo Gilpin, 'China, Africa and the international aid system: A challenge to the norms underpinning the neoliberal world order?', *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 58:3 (2023), pp. 277–97; Georg Lammich, 'Lost in transfer: Tracing policy diffusion and norm-shaping in Tanzania–China relations', *Global Policy*, 15 (2024), pp. 886–900.

<sup>8</sup>Jean-Germain Gros and Hung-Gay Fung, 'Theorizing Sino-African relations: A constructivist perspective', *Journal of International Relations and Foreign Policy*, 7:1 (2019), pp. 39–54.

<sup>9</sup>Catherine Gegout, 'Realism, neocolonialism, and European military intervention in Africa', in Roberto Belloni, Vincent Della Sala, and Paul Viotti (eds), *Fear and Uncertainty in Europe: The Return to Realism?* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 265–88.

<sup>10</sup>Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 50; Adrian Hyde-Price, 'Realist ethics and the "War on Terror"', *Globalizations*, 6:1 (2009), pp. 23–40 (p. 26).

<sup>11</sup>Gilpin, *War and Change*, p. 31; Daniel Markey, 'Prestige and the origins of war: Returning to realism's roots', *Security Studies*, 8:4 (1999), pp. 126–71 (p. 129).

<sup>12</sup>Gegout, 'Realism, neocolonialism, and European military intervention', p. 168.

<sup>13</sup>Daniel Fiott, 'Realist thought and humanitarian intervention', *The International History Review*, 35:4 (2013), pp. 766–82.

<sup>14</sup>Gegout, 'Realism, neocolonialism, and European military intervention'.

yielding to international pressure to adopt a more cooperative stance occurred during the Darfur crisis in 2007. The European Union (EU), UK Parliament, Western celebrities, and political figures called on China to leverage its influence over Sudan to end violence, disarm militias, and support humanitarian relief efforts. EU foreign ministers urged China's active involvement, while UK MPs directly appealed to President Hu Jintao to reconsider China's Sudan policy. Pressure intensified with calls for a boycott of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, and the European Parliament sanctioned China's oil company, CNPC, for its reluctance to press Sudan to cease the violence. In response, Beijing adopted a more constructive approach, recognising that its stance on Sudan had broader implications for its image as a responsible international stakeholder.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, internally, the claim of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to rule is no longer based solely on maintaining domestic economic growth, but also on the image of a respected 'responsible great power,' able to protect its interests in the international sphere.<sup>16</sup>

In the subsequent sections, this article will examine the evolution of security-related aspects in China's Africa policy and discuss different types of intervention.

### Security aspects of contemporary Chinese policies on Africa

While Western investment tends to avoid the worst governance environments in Africa, Chinese investment is indifferent to a country's property rights and rule of law and is more likely to be attracted by the lack of competition in countries with poor governance.<sup>17</sup> Chinese firms have made massive investments and contracts in 12 of the top 20 failed or failing states, with many projects in conflict-sensitive sectors.<sup>18</sup> Supply disruptions caused by civil war, revolution, or social unrest jeopardise China's domestic growth, which relies on energy resources and minerals imported from some of the most unstable regions in Africa.<sup>19</sup> Despite the Chinese government's economic concerns, China's involvement in African security is also a response to several incidents targeting the Chinese diaspora on the continent. In the political arena, China has managed to differentiate itself from former colonial powers with its discourse on South–South cooperation and mantra of mutual benefit and win–win cooperation, but terrorists and rebel groups make little distinction between China and the West.<sup>20</sup> Chinese citizens and investments face threats from transnational terrorist organisations, including Boko Haram in Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, and Niger; al-Qaeda in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso; and the Somali al-Shabaab movement in Ethiopia, Uganda, and Kenya. Kidnappings of Chinese nationals have also occurred in the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Moreover, China is concerned about piracy in the Gulf of Aden, the Gulf of Guinea, and off the coast of Somalia, which poses risks to Chinese shipping and trade in these regions. These conflicts and unstable regimes endanger China's physical presence and the success of its investments in Africa, compelling China to adapt its strategic approach.<sup>21</sup> Given the extensive footprint of Chinese investments and nationals across almost every part of Africa, any major conflict now has a direct impact on China's capital. This exposure presents significant risks, including political instability, supply chain disruptions, and financial losses. One prominent example is the outbreak of civil war in Libya, which placed many Chinese nationals working in

<sup>15</sup>Yanzhou Xu, *China, Africa and Responsible International Engagement* (New York: Routledge, 2018) p. 109.

<sup>16</sup>Miwa Hirono, Yang Jiang, and Marc Lanteigne, 'China's new roles and behaviour in conflict-affected regions: Reconsidering non-interference and non-intervention', *The China Quarterly*, 239 (2019), pp. 573–93 (p. 584).

<sup>17</sup>David Dollar, *China's Engagement with Africa: From Natural Resources to Human Resources* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2016), p. 31.

<sup>18</sup>Lloyd Thrall, 'China's expanding African relations: Implications for U.S. national security', RAND (2015), available at: [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR905.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR905.html), p. 18.

<sup>19</sup>Ely Ratner, 'The emergent security threats reshaping China's rise', *Washington Quarterly*, 34:1 (2011), pp. 29–44 (p. 32).

<sup>20</sup>Abdelhak Bassou, 'China faced with the proliferation of the terrorist phenomenon in Africa', OCP Policy Brief 16/10 (2016), available at: <http://www.policycenter.ma/sites/default/files/OCPPC-PB1610%20En.pdf>.

<sup>21</sup>Georg Lammich, 'Stability through multilateral cooperation: China and AU security cooperation', *African Conflict and Peacebuilding Review*, 9:1 (2019), pp. 100–23.

the country in harm's way, directly disrupted China's oil supply, and resulted in an estimated \$20 billion US dollars in losses for Chinese companies.<sup>22</sup>

To mitigate threats to its citizens, assets, and interests on the continent, China has supported UN peacekeeping missions in Africa and called for greater international cooperation on counterterrorism in the region. While protecting overseas investments is only one of several drivers of China's renewed approach to participation in peace missions, the Chinese government does exhibit a clear inclination to leverage its peacekeeping involvement when its core economic interests are at stake.<sup>23</sup>

Despite recently emphasising more strongly the need to 'reform' UN peacekeeping and respecting the rights of host states to independently choose their social systems and development paths, China has remained a significant contributor to UN and AU peacekeeping operations.<sup>24</sup> It sends more peacekeepers to African missions than any other permanent member of the UN Security Council and is the second-largest financier, after the United States.<sup>25</sup> Since China first participated in UN peacekeeping in 1990, it has deployed most of the soldiers it sends on UN missions to Africa. As of February 2023, China ranks among the top 10 suppliers of uniformed UN peacekeeping personnel, with 2,227 troops and police. Additionally, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy conducts regular convoy operations in the Gulf of Aden and participates in counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Guinea.<sup>26</sup> In addition to these multilateral efforts, China is now actively addressing security as one of Africa's major challenges and has accepted a degree of responsibility in promoting peace. At the bilateral level, China has established security relationships with most African countries: more than half of all African states have defence attachés in Beijing, and China maintains at least 19 defence attaché offices in Africa and has various relationships with African security chiefs.<sup>27</sup>

China's security-related approach towards Africa has been shaped by a number of policy papers that relate to the importance of security in Africa, such as the well-known Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the various documents related to the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). These policy papers provide important insights into China's approach to security-related issues in Africa and reflect changes in China's own strategic interests and Africa's security challenges.

China's Africa policy, first issued in 2006 and revised in 2018, outlines China's overall approach to engagement with African countries, including in the areas of defence, peacekeeping, counterterrorism, and maritime security. The documents also promote political solutions to conflicts, enhance African countries' capacity to maintain peace and security, and deepen mutual understanding and cooperation between China and African countries. The 2018 policy paper was revised again in 2021, now entitled 'China and Africa in the New Era: A Partnership of Equals'. It emphasises the importance of respecting African countries' ownership of their peace and security agendas and supports African-led initiatives. The document lists specific measures to support peace and security in Africa, including providing financial and material support for peacekeeping operations, training African peacekeepers, and strengthening intelligence sharing and law enforcement cooperation. It also highlights other instruments of military cooperation, such as port calls and joint

<sup>22</sup>Yun Sun, 'Xi Jinping's Africa policy: The first year', Brookings (14 April 2014), available at: {<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2014/04/14/xi-jinpings-africa-policy-the-first-year/>}, p. 10.

<sup>23</sup>Luke Patey, 'Chinese peace and its discontents: China's peacemaking and peacekeeping in South Sudan', *International Affairs*, 100:3 (2024), pp. 981–1000 (p. 995).

<sup>24</sup>China appears to be actively contesting the normative underpinnings of UN peacekeeping practice. Lwanga Egbewatt Arrey, 'China's push for normative change in UN peacekeeping', Institute for Security and Development Policy (2023), available at: {<https://www.isdp.eu/un-peacekeeping-china-pushing-for-normative-changes/>}.

<sup>25</sup>Lammich, 'Lost in transfer'; Judd Devermont, Marielle Harris and Alison Albelda, 'Personal ties: Measuring Chinese and U.S. engagement with African security chiefs', CSIS Briefs (2021), available at: {[https://csiswebsiteprod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fspublic/publication/210804\\_Devermont\\_Personal\\_Ties.pdf?VersionId=.Ycq8Uld.T5woHvt58xPvmugt\\_2NNfNj](https://csiswebsiteprod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fspublic/publication/210804_Devermont_Personal_Ties.pdf?VersionId=.Ycq8Uld.T5woHvt58xPvmugt_2NNfNj)}, p. 3.

<sup>26</sup>UN data on troop and police contributors, available at: {<https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/troop-and-police-contributors>}.

<sup>27</sup>Shen Zhixiong, 'On China's Military Diplomacy in Africa', in Chris Alden, Abiodun Alao, Zhang Chun and Laura Barber (eds), *China and Africa* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 101–21 (p. 109).

exercises and training. Alongside these policy documents, security-related issues are regularly discussed in the framework of FOCAC meetings, and new joint structures concerning peace and conflict transformation in Africa have frequently emerged.

Furthermore, while primarily an economic initiative, the BRI has security implications for Africa. As noted by Nantulya, the end state of One Belt One Road is defined as a new global system of alternative economic, political, and security ‘interdependencies’, with China at its centre, and the BRI directly supports many elements of China’s national security strategy.<sup>28</sup> Although many of the impacts of the BRI in Africa fall into the category of non-conventional (‘soft’) security activities, such as promoting stability and reducing conflict through economic development, the BRI has also had a direct impact on China’s military presence on the continent: as China’s geo-economic sphere expands, its global economic presence now encompasses trade, investment, infrastructure development, and resource extraction across all corners of the globe. In tandem with this, the PLA has broadened its power projection capabilities to deter hostilities against China, safeguard its overseas investments, and incorporate the protection of BRI projects into its international agenda.<sup>29</sup> To adapt to these new tasks, the PLA Navy (PLAN) has expanded its one-ocean strategy covering the Western Pacific to a two-ocean strategy now extending across the Indian Ocean to the coast of East Africa; the PLA Army (PLAA) has developed a doctrine of ‘global combat’ (全域作戰 *quanyu zuozhan*), and the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) has incorporated ‘extraterritorial warfare’ (域外作戰 *yuwai zuozhan*) scenarios into its strategy.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, direct support for Africa’s security sector has also been labelled as part of the BRI; some countries, such as Tanzania, have received additional military assistance; and China has made several pledges to strengthen the military capabilities of its strategic partners in Africa tied to BRI projects.

When examining China’s changing role as a security provider in Africa, it is worth examining some more general policies that shape China’s evolving global security approach. The white paper ‘China’s National Defence in the New Era’ (新时代的中国国防 *xīn shídài de zhōngguó guófán*), which was issued in 2019, reflects China’s efforts to modernise and strengthen its military and its overall approach to national defence and security, both domestically and internationally. Though it does not specifically mention Africa, its passage on international security cooperation highlights the importance of promoting multilateralism, building partnerships, and engaging in regional security dialogues.

The ‘Global Security Initiative’ (全球安全倡议 *Quánqiú ānquán chàngyì*, GSI), announced by Xi Jinping during a keynote speech at the Boao Forum in April 2022 and published as a ‘concept paper’ in February 2023, is not only the latest addition to the ever-growing list of Chinese policy acronyms but also another attempt by China to shape global security governance and strengthen its role as a policy provider to the Global South. China’s Global Security Initiative (GSI), along with the Global Development Initiative (GDI) and the Global Civilisation Initiative (GCI) announced in 2021 and 2023, respectively, form a trio of broad yet interconnected concepts under the ‘Community of Common Destiny’. These initiatives reflect China’s emphasis on its distinct systemic approach, diverging from Western models. Under Xi’s leadership, the CCP is promoting these as part of Beijing’s alternative vision for the global order, challenging the current Western dominance.<sup>31</sup> The GSI advances a number of Chinese policy principles and concepts, such as ‘invisible security’, to address international security challenges, but it does not provide much detail or concrete measures to implement peace and stability.

<sup>28</sup> Paul Nantulya, ‘Implications for Africa from China’s One Belt One Road strategy’, Africa Center for Strategic Studies (22 March 2019), available at: <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/implications-for-africa-china-one-belt-one-road-strategy/>.

<sup>29</sup> Liu Huirong, ‘海洋战略新疆域的法治思考’ [Reflections on the rule of law in the new frontier of maritime strategy], *亚洲太安与海洋研究* [*Asian Security and Ocean Research*], 4 (2018), pp. 16–18 (p. 16).

<sup>30</sup> Xiangning Wu and You Ji, ‘The military drivers of China’s Belt and Road endeavor: Expanding the global reach from land mass to the maritime domains’, *China Review*, 20:4 (2020), pp. 223–44 (p. 228).

<sup>31</sup> Lammich, ‘Lost in transfer’.

The GSI is underpinned by six interlinked ‘commitments’: to adhere to the vision of common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security; to respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries; to abide by the purposes and principles of the UN Charter; to take seriously the legitimate security concerns of all countries; to resolve differences and disputes between countries peacefully through dialogue and consultation; and to maintain security in both traditional and non-traditional areas.<sup>32</sup>

Western observers understand the GSI mostly as an alternative approach to the Western-led security order, and it has primarily been discussed in the context of China’s stance on Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.<sup>33</sup> Although the temporal propinquity of China’s reflection on the changing global security environment and Russia’s attack is no sheer coincidence, the GSI is more than an ad hoc policy formulation; it is the logical continuation of Xi’s vision for forging a new international system.

Despite its global outlook, the GSI also has implications for China’s future role in Africa. Many Chinese scholars, politicians, and semi-authoritative commentaries added their interpretation to Xi’s introduction of the GSI and highlighted the new self-confidence of China as a global security provider. Although it is not yet clear how the various actors will translate the abstract policy formulations of the GSI into practice, the new narrative is likely to be interpreted as encouragement to take more risks in defending China’s core security interests abroad, and there is every indication that China will step up its security activism in Africa. China’s main military newspaper, *PLA Daily* (解放军报, Jiěfāngjūn bào), called for the Chinese military to provide international peacekeeping, maritime escorts, humanitarian rescue, and other operations as well as more international public security.<sup>34</sup> Hu Bin, the Chinese ambassador to Djibouti, which is home to China’s first and only overseas military base (officially called a ‘naval support facility’), called for better strategic communication and increased military cooperation with Africa in the wake of Xi’s announcement.<sup>35</sup> Although the GSI does not make any concrete material commitments or set a regulatory framework for the conflicting objectives and vested interests of Chinese traditional and non-traditional security actors in Africa, it can be understood as a cue to step up their engagement. Chinese security actors operating in Africa – ranging from the diplomatic corps of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Public Security, and Defence to an ever-growing number of private security companies (PSCs) and state-owned defence companies dominating the arms market for China’s armed forces and their auxiliary branches – can increase their security-related activities under the umbrella of the GSI. The GSI can thus be understood as the external extension of Xi’s 2014 ‘comprehensive national security’ (总体国家安全 Zǒngtǐ guójiā ānquán) concept that has turned national security into a key paradigm permeating all aspects of China’s governance. China’s foreign policy is now following its domestic policy in shifting from an emphasis on development over security to an approach that puts security and development on an equal footing.<sup>36</sup> Paradoxically, the increased focus on

<sup>32</sup> Global Security Initiative Concept Paper (full text), 全球安全倡议概念文件(全文) [Quánqiú ānquán chàngì gàiiniàn wénjiàn (quánwén)], available at: {[https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjbxw\\_new/202302/t20230221\\_11028322.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjbxw_new/202302/t20230221_11028322.shtml)}.

<sup>33</sup> Carla Freeman and Alex Stephenson, ‘Xi kicks off campaign for a Chinese vision of global security’, United States Institute for Peace (5 October 2022), available at: {<https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/10/xi-kicks-campaign-chinese-vision-global-security>}.

<sup>34</sup> Lukas Fiala, ‘Rightsizing China’s Global Security Initiative’, China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe (CHOICE) (22 November 2022), available at: {<https://chinaobservers.eu/rightsizing-chinas-global-security-initiative/>}; Wang Feng, ‘为构建人类命运共同体发挥更大作用’ [Play a greater role in building a community with a shared future for mankind], PLA-Daily Comment (1 November 2022), available at: {[http://www.mod.gov.cn/jmsd/2022-11/01/content\\_4924756.htm](http://www.mod.gov.cn/jmsd/2022-11/01/content_4924756.htm)}.

<sup>35</sup> Hu Bin, 为建设持久和平、普遍安全的非洲大陆携手并进 [Working hand in hand to build an African continent of lasting peace and universal security], available at: {[https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/zwbdt\\_673032/wjzs/202208/t20220802\\_10732028.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/zwbdt_673032/wjzs/202208/t20220802_10732028.shtml)}.

<sup>36</sup> Xi Jinping: 习近平:坚持总体国家安全观 走中国特色国家安全道路 [Adhere to the overall national security concept and follow the path of national security with Chinese characteristics], available at: {[http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2014-04/15/c\\_1110253910.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2014-04/15/c_1110253910.htm)}



security, albeit with a different normative underpinning than the concept proposed by liberal-democratic nations, means that China is slowly departing from its ‘development first’ doctrine in Africa and is catching up with a more interventionist interpretation of the development–security nexus. The interrelation between security and development is a well-established concept in global policymaking, although it is subject to ongoing debate and often associated with an interventionist approach.<sup>37</sup> The contemporary security–development nexus promoted by Western powers frames their international engagement in Africa and has often been used to justify preventive, conflict-diminishing measures to enable sustainable development. Although the Chinese variation of this concept shared the fundamental idea that development and peace are interrelated, it emphasised national sovereignty, political stability, and state-led economic planning as core to a prosperous and harmonious society. With the revaluation of security as a new leitmotif for its global engagement, China has shifted the balance of its understanding of the nexus; and, while still downplaying related concepts such as democracy and good governance, security and stability are now framed as the highest political priority and preconditions for continued economic development. Even more than some traditional powers, China favours stability over regime change and has a tendency to ignore humanitarian emergencies if interference would mean undermining established structures. China’s focus on regime preservation in Africa is a reflection of the domestic principle of ‘stability maintenance’ (维稳 *Wéiwěn*), which has become one of the core policies and most important sources of political legitimacy for the CCP. China’s prerogative of stability has become a systemic imperative that extends to foreign policy. The resulting incumbency-based approach has led to accusations that China lacks impartiality and seeks to maintain the status quo by providing arms and economic aid to governments involved in conflict while marginalising other stakeholders.<sup>38</sup>

Beijing’s ‘Chinese peace’ concept shares certain foundational ideas with the liberal peace model, such as the belief that democracies tend to grow more peaceful over time, and China has largely refrained from directly challenging the normative foundations of the concept. Instead, it questions the sequencing of the liberal model and the primacy of democratic institution-building.<sup>39</sup> China emphasises economic development as a precondition for peace and strategically markets its approach as a distinct alternative to Western strategies. This branding strategy aims to appeal to African leaders who are cautious of foreign interference, enhancing the attractiveness of China’s peacekeeping and peacebuilding initiatives.<sup>40</sup>

Chinese diplomats have begun to assemble existing cooperation agreements, including the China–Africa Cooperation Vision 2035 and the Outlook on Peace and Development in the Horn of Africa, under the umbrella of the GSI framework.<sup>41</sup> Ongoing activities such as China’s military assistance to the AU, joint exercises and on-site training of Chinese and African forces, and cooperation on small arms and light weapons control are now labelled as part of Xi’s GSI vision.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Björn Hettne, ‘Development and security: Origins and future’, *Security Dialogue*, 41:1 (2010), pp. 31–52; Shahar Hameiri, Lee Jones, Yizheng Zou, ‘The development–insecurity nexus in China’s near-abroad: Rethinking cross-border economic integration in an era of state transformation’, *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 49:3 (2019), pp. 473–99 (p. 473).

<sup>38</sup> Paul Nantulya, ‘Considerations for a prospective new Chinese naval base in Africa’, Africa Center for Strategic Studies (12 May 2022), available at: <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/considerations-prospective-chinese-naval-base-africa/>.

<sup>39</sup> Xinyu Yuan, ‘The Chinese approach to peacebuilding: Contesting liberal peace?’, *Third World Quarterly*, 43:7 (2022), pp. 1798–816 (p. 1810).

<sup>40</sup> Ilaria Carrozza, ‘Legitimizing China’s growing engagement in African security: Change within continuity of official discourse’, *The China Quarterly*, 248 (2021), pp. 1174–99 (p. 1188).

<sup>41</sup> Chris Cash, ‘What is China’s Global Security Initiative?’, Council on Gestrategy Geopolitics Programme Explainer No. GPE08 (2022), p. 9.

<sup>42</sup> Ambassador Zhou Pingjian: 周平健大使: 全球安全倡议: 通往和平与安宁的道路 [Global Security Initiative, A Path to Peace and Tranquility], available at: <https://bit.ly/3RytHQm>.

The following sections focus on three cases of China's security engagement in Africa, namely its military support of the Tanzania People's Defence Force (TPDF), its diplomatic mission in the Horn of Africa, and its support of the AU peace and security architecture.

### Military to military cooperation: The case of Tanzania

Military and police cooperation, counterterrorism, and law enforcement are listed as strategic priorities in the FOCAC Dakar Action Plan 2022–2024: 'The two sides will lay special emphasis on defense and military capabilities and actively conduct exchanges and cooperation in fields such as military education, military training, military medicine, logistics support, and maritime security.'

What shape this emphasis on military cooperation could take can be exemplified by examining China's cooperation with the Tanzanian defence forces. Tanzania's military cooperation with China is among the strongest and longest-running on the continent. Already under founding President Julius Nyerere, Tanganyika that was 1964 unified with Zanzibar to form Tanzania accepted materiel, training, and weapons – including fighter jets and tanks – from China.<sup>43</sup> Tanzania developed close links with Mao Zedong's China, which offered considerable support in equipping and training the TPDF. Consequentially, the organisation of the TPDF mirrored some structures of the PLA, such as the recruitment of party loyalists and the political representation in the party's national executive.<sup>44</sup> The good relationship between China and the TPDF continued through the following years, and in the last decade Tanzania was estimated to be the African country that received the most Chinese military aid, with only the African Union receiving a larger share of donated military equipment.<sup>45</sup>

China's military cooperation in Tanzania today involves several types of engagements: joint military exercises, military training, military infrastructure projects, arms supply, and military aid. In 2014, PLA units performed their first joint drills with Tanzania, and the two countries have also conducted joint naval training. Chinese naval vessels have made frequent port calls to Tanzania.

As well as boosting high-level military-to-military exchanges, China regularly provides at an increasing scale different categories of military training of varying lengths, both in China and in Africa, as a form of capability-building for the armed forces. Some of the training is extensive, such as the 25-day China–Tanzania joint military training, code-named 'Sincere Partners-2019', with several hundred troops participating. In July and August 2024, the Sino-Tanzanian training exercise 'Peace Unity-2024' (和平团结, héping tuánjié) allowed the PLA to demonstrate its evolving joint expeditionary capabilities and strengthen its partnership with Tanzania. Although shorter than previous exercises, it reflected ongoing military cooperation between the PLA and TPDF, highlighted increasing PLAA participation, and affirmed the broader strategic relationship between the PRC and Tanzania.<sup>46</sup>

Tanzania also provides a prime example of loan-funded military infrastructure built by China. Starting in 1969 at a place called Nachingwea in the Lindi region of southern Tanzania, China built what was then Africa's largest training base for the TPDF, adding a naval base and an airstrip a few years later.<sup>47</sup> In 2018, the late president John Pombe Joseph Magufuli opened a new \$30 million US

<sup>43</sup>Joshua Meservey, 'China's strategic aims in Africa', testimony before the U.S.–China Economic and Security Review Commission (2020), p. 9, available at: {[https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Meservey\\_Testimony.pdf](https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Meservey_Testimony.pdf)}.

<sup>44</sup>Muhidin Shangwe, 'From friends to partners? The changing nature of Sino-Tanzanian relations', *Notes de l'Ifri* (2021), p. 21, available at: {[https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/shangwe\\_sino\\_tanzanian\\_relations\\_2021.pdf](https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/shangwe_sino_tanzanian_relations_2021.pdf)}.

<sup>45</sup>Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, 'China's military aid is probably less than you think', RAND (26 July 2022), available at: {<https://www.rand.org/blog/2022/07/chinas-military-aid-is-probably-less-than-you-think.html>}.

<sup>46</sup>Jake Vartanian, 'Peace and unity: China's growing military footprint in Tanzania', Strategic Studies Institute (9 October 2024), available at: {<https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/SSI-Media/Recent-Publications/Display/Article/3930357/peace-and-unity-chinas-growing-military-footprint-in-tanzania/>}.

<sup>47</sup>Meservey, 'China's strategic aims in Africa', p. 8.

dollars training centre for the TPDF in Bagamoyo District, built with the help of China's PLA.<sup>48</sup> Some experts speculate that Bagamoyo, located about 75 km south of Tanzania's main port of Dar es Salaam, is also a candidate for China's second military base after Djibouti.<sup>49</sup>

The Chinese government also built the Tanzania Military Academy (TMA), and the Shanghai Construction Group has been contracted by the Tanzanian Ministry of Defence and National Service to build 12,000 housing units, financed by a \$550 million loan from the Exim Bank of China.<sup>50</sup>

Chinese arms sales are another significant element of China's military engagement, although the exact amount and type of arms sales are not always transparent and publicly available. Since 2000, China has transformed itself from the world's largest importer of weapons to a net exporter. Africa has become an important and growing market for Chinese arms exports, and China has sold weapons to 23 African countries, more than any other supplier.<sup>51</sup> Some of the most significant arms sales have gone to countries such as Sudan, Zimbabwe, and Angola, which are embroiled in civil war or have a history of human rights abuses. Although China is just one of many arms suppliers on the continent, it has drawn heavy criticism from human rights organisations and Western governments, who argue that China is fuelling conflict and oppression on the continent. Tanzania is one of six African countries – along with Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Namibia, the Seychelles, and Zambia – that have received more than 90 per cent of their arms from China over the past two decades.<sup>52</sup> China has delivered a variety of military hardware to Tanzania, including amphibious tanks, self-propelled mortars, mobile short-range air defence systems, and rocket launchers. In recent years, these arms have become increasingly price-competitive and technologically sophisticated. Beyond cost and quality, China's flexible approach to maintenance and training further boosts the appeal of its weapons compared to those offered by traditional suppliers. Moreover, arms sales often form part of broader package deals – combining arms transfers with loans and access to natural resources – thus aligning security cooperation with strategic and economic interests. In this context, integrating Chinese equipment and instructional components into joint training exercises not only familiarises the TPDF with these weapon systems but also enhances their overall attractiveness, strengthening the long-term security relationship. Some experts, however, are sceptical of a connection between weapon sales and Chinese foreign policy objectives, suggesting instead a supply-and-demand relationship with profit, not strategy, as the main driver of China's recent proliferation as arms supplier in Africa.<sup>53</sup> As Nantulya observes, many African governments including Tanzania present their collaboration with China's military as a means to benefit from the PLA's rapid modernisation.<sup>54</sup> Yet external critics continue to question this interpretation. Some Kenyan observers, for example, view initiatives like Peace Unity-2024 as reflective of broader strategic intentions by China to deepen its security presence in Tanzania. In Tanzania, similar concerns have surfaced that China's expanding military involvement may erode the country's non-aligned foreign policy posture, pulling it closer to Beijing's geopolitical orbit and away from the established principal of non-alignment. Other commentators suggest that such partnerships risk

<sup>48</sup>China–Tanzania military relations', *The African Crime and Conflict Journal* (4 April 2022), available at <https://theafricancriminologyjournal.wordpress.com/2022/04/04/strategic-ties-china-tanzania-military-relations/>.

<sup>49</sup>David Brewster, 'China's new network of Indian Ocean bases', *Real Clear Defence* (30 January 2018), available at [https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2018/01/30/chinas\\_new\\_network\\_of\\_indian\\_ocean\\_bases\\_112980.html](https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2018/01/30/chinas_new_network_of_indian_ocean_bases_112980.html).

<sup>50</sup>New Chinese-built training center for Tanzanian army', *Army Recognition* (23 February 2018), available at: [https://www.armyrecognition.com/february\\_2018\\_global\\_defense\\_security\\_army\\_news\\_industry/new\\_chinese-built\\_training\\_training\\_center\\_for\\_tanzanian\\_army.html?utm\\_content=cmp-true](https://www.armyrecognition.com/february_2018_global_defense_security_army_news_industry/new_chinese-built_training_training_center_for_tanzanian_army.html?utm_content=cmp-true).

<sup>51</sup>Luke Encarnation, 'Assessing the impact of Chinese arms in Africa', *Georgetown Security Studies Review* (2020), available at: <https://georgetownsecuritystudiesreview.org/2021/04/20/assessing-the-impact-of-chinese-arms-in-africa/>

<sup>52</sup>Cullen S. Hendrix, 'Arms and influence? Chinese arms transfers to Africa in context', *Peterson Institute for International Economics* (15 July 2020), available at: <https://www.piie.com/blogs/realtime-economic-issues-watch/arms-and-influence-chinese-arms-transfers-africa-context>.

<sup>53</sup>Encarnation, 'Assessing the impact of Chinese arms in Africa'.

<sup>54</sup>Paul Nantulya, 'The growing militarization of China's Africa policy', *Africa Center for Strategic Studies* (2024), available at: <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/militarization-china-africa-policy>.

embedding the continent in the very geostrategic rivalries African governments profess a desire to circumvent.<sup>55</sup>

### Diplomatic intervention: The case of Ethiopia

Ethiopia is another long-standing partner of China, with diplomatic relations dating back more than 50 years. There are currently around 400 Chinese construction and manufacturing projects in Ethiopia, valued at over \$4 billion US dollars. Much of Ethiopia's air, road, and rail infrastructure is financed and built by China, which is also its largest trading partner.<sup>56</sup> China partially funded the 750-km Ethiopia–Djibouti railway, and Chinese companies have stakes in 10 industrial zones across the country and were involved in the construction of Ethiopia's Grand Renaissance Dam (GERD). According to the CLA database, China has currently lent US\$13.7 billion to Ethiopia, with transport, energy, and ICT being by far the most prominent sectors.<sup>57</sup>

China's substantial economic investments in Ethiopia and the strategic importance of the Horn of Africa have increasingly drawn Beijing into the region's highly volatile socio-political environment and its various multidimensional conflicts.<sup>58</sup>

Since November 2020, Ethiopia has suffered from a deadly internal conflict between the federal government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which has quickly degenerated into a full-scale civil war involving various internal and external actors, claiming an estimated 50,000 lives and displacing millions. Despite mass atrocities and an immense humanitarian crisis, China has repeatedly obstructed the UN Security Council's response, citing sovereignty concerns.<sup>59</sup> The Ethiopian government lauded China for rejecting external power involvement and following Ethiopia's stance not to internationalise the conflict.<sup>60</sup> China's blockade of international action in Ethiopia has been heavily criticised by Western powers, and internally China has also shown some concern about the ongoing conflict, given its massive investment portfolio and an estimated 30,000 Chinese nationals living in Ethiopia.<sup>61</sup> During the Tigray conflict, many Chinese firms halted operations, business at some Chinese-led operations such as the industrial park in Mekele came to a standstill, and about 600 Chinese citizens evacuated the region.<sup>62</sup> Despite China's repeated assertions that the Ethiopian government is fully capable of resolving the conflict without external intervention, China has launched a major diplomatic initiative to support the peace process. Following a visit to Ethiopia and Eritrea, another country deeply involved in the Tigray conflict, state councillor and foreign minister Wang Yi called on the countries to resolve the many conflicts

<sup>55</sup>Nantulya, 'Growing militarization'.

<sup>56</sup>Joseph Sany and Thomas P. Sheehy, 'Despite high stakes in Ethiopia, China sits on the sidelines of peace efforts: Can Washington successfully pressure Beijing to join multilateral peace efforts?', *Analysis and Commentary*, United States Institute of Peace (2022).

<sup>57</sup>The Chinese Loans to Africa (CLA) Database is an interactive data project tracking loan commitments from Chinese policy and commercial banks, government entities, companies, and other financiers to African governments and state-owned enterprises, available at: <https://www.bu.edu/gdp/chinese-loans-to-africa-database/>.

<sup>58</sup>Nadine Godehardt and Karolin Eickhoff, 'China's Horn of Africa Initiative: Fostering or fragmenting peace?', SWP Megatrends Afrika Working Paper No. 1 (2022), p. 3.

<sup>59</sup>Human Rights Watch on the situation in Tigray and the UN response, available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/07/02/un-security-council-end-inaction-ethiopia>.

<sup>60</sup>Comments by Redwan Hussein, Ethiopia's state foreign affairs minister and also the main government spokesperson for the military campaign in Tigray. 'Factbox: As mediation calls mount, who has leverage in Ethiopia', *Reuters* (23 November 2020), available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-ethiopia-conflict-leverage-factbox/factbox-as-mediation-calls-mount-who-has-leverage-in-ethiopia-idUKKBN2831LH>.

<sup>61</sup>Foreign Minister Wang said that conflicts in the Horn of Africa hamper the region's 'tremendous potential for development', and 'such a situation should not be allowed to continue'. Shannon Tiezzi, 'China looks to play more active role in Horn of Africa conflicts', *The Diplomat* (7 January 2022), available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2022/01/china-looks-to-play-more-active-role-in-horn-of-africa-conflicts/>.

<sup>62</sup>Ruixing Cao and Nele Noessel, 'Political settlement and China's overseas operation: The case of Ethiopia', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 20:3 (2024), ora014 (p. 9), available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/orae014>.

in the region and pledged that China would provide ‘necessary support’. During his visit to Kenya, he introduced the Initiative for Peaceful Development in the Horn of Africa, aimed at tackling critical challenges in security, development, and governance. According to Wang Yi, the initiative aims to promote long-term stability and sustainable development in the Horn of Africa by encouraging regional unity and self-reliance. The framework emphasises strengthening intraregional dialogue, advancing infrastructure development and economic integration through the ‘two axes plus two coasts’ model (referring to the Red Sea and East African coast), and supporting governance reforms adapted to the region’s specific context, with China providing diplomatic support and technical expertise to facilitate these objectives.<sup>63</sup>

Shortly afterwards, he appointed Ambassador Xue Bing as the first Chinese special envoy to the region.<sup>64</sup> In June 2022, China hosted a two-day peace conference in Ethiopia’s capital Addis Ababa as part of the Peaceful Development Initiative, which was attended by foreign ministers and senior officials from Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, and Uganda. While no specific regional conflicts were discussed, Xue Bing declared his willingness to act as a mediator in the region, if requested by the conflict parties.<sup>65</sup> He also tied the GSI to China’s efforts to promote peace and stability in the region and expressed Beijing’s willingness to share ‘Chinese wisdom’ (中国智慧 Zhōngguó zhìhuì) with the region, framing China as a constructive external actor with original security concepts. The second edition of the Peace Conference was held in Beijing in June 2024 but garnered significantly less attention from Chinese, African, and Western media. Billed as a Senior Officials Meeting, the discussions were framed within the broader context of the Global Development Initiative (GDI) and Global Security Initiative (GSI). However, only limited concrete outcomes were publicly disclosed following the event.<sup>66</sup>

The initiative echoes earlier diplomatic efforts in the Sudan/South Sudan conflict and seems to cement East Africa as a space where China can bend its non-intervention policy to experiment with conflict mediation and test the adoption of a more engaged foreign policy approach to bolster its international image, position itself as a provider of regional public goods, and protect its practical interests.

China also continues to rely on its previous approach to mediation, which revolves around high-profile mediation tools that target the top levels of governments, including host diplomacy activities, top-level visits, and special envoys. China uses multiple diplomatic resources (economic influence, China’s role in the United Nations, development and military aid, and multi-cooperation efforts) to bring the conflicting parties to the negotiating table, but it does not impose sanctions or alienate any of the countries involved. In practice, China’s economic clout in the Horn of Africa gives it enough leverage to persuade any national actor there not to reject outright any mediation efforts initiated by a Chinese envoy. Although there have been a few cases where China has acted as a frontline peace broker, its approach has tended to be passive and facilitative, with limited involvement in the actual content of the negotiations, relying on regional parties to set the agenda.<sup>67</sup> Similarly, recent successes in the cessation of hostilities between the Ethiopian government and the TPLF have been led by the former Nigerian president and African Union high representative Olesegun Obasanjo and regional actors, without China playing a decisive role. As Nantulya argues, there was even a distinct lack of coordination between African institutions mediating on behalf of the AU Peace and Security Council and Xue Bing, the Chinese special envoy, who was seen as

<sup>63</sup>Wang Yi Talks about the ‘Initiative of Peaceful Development in the Horn of Africa’ (7 January 2022), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The People’s Republic of China, available at: [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/gjhq\\_665435/2913\\_665441/3014\\_664044/3016\\_664048/202201/t20220107\\_10479933.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/gjhq_665435/2913_665441/3014_664044/3016_664048/202201/t20220107_10479933.html).

<sup>64</sup>In addition to China, the EU, the US, and the UK have also appointed special envoys to the Horn of Africa in the wake of the escalating conflict in Tigray.

<sup>65</sup>Godehardt and Eickhoff, ‘China’s Horn of Africa Initiative’, p. 4.

<sup>66</sup>Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Mao Ning’s Regular Press Conference on 25 June 2024, available at: [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202407/t20240730\\_11463246.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202407/t20240730_11463246.html).

<sup>67</sup>Godehardt and Eickhoff, ‘China’s Horn of Africa Initiative’, p. 17.

incumbent-focused and favouring the Ethiopian government, marginalising political opponents, other key political actors, and civil society.<sup>68</sup>

Cao and Noesselt note that the peace agreement, facilitated by the African Union's diplomatic efforts without any notable input from China, highlights the disparity between China's theoretical role assertions and the practical limitations Chinese actors encounter in their interactions with Africa.<sup>69</sup> China's state-centric approach clashes with the complexity and interconnectedness of intra- and interstate conflicts in a region where intertwined ethnicity, religion, and ill-defined boundary issues have caused deep tensions between multiple actors. Although China's foray into conflict mediation has brought it into line with several other traditional powers in their efforts to stabilise the Horn, there is little evidence that China has a coherent strategy or plans a sustained engagement that would allow it to displace Western diplomacy in the region.

### **Institutionalised cooperation mechanisms in the security sector: China and the AU peace and security architecture**

In its 2006 Africa Policy Paper, China for the first time expressed greater support for regional and multilateral organisations as security actors in Africa:

China supports the positive efforts of the AU and other African regional organizations and African countries concerned to resolve regional conflicts and will support within our own capabilities. It will call on the UN Security Council to pay attention to and assist in the resolution of regional conflicts in Africa. It will support and participate in United Nations peacekeeping operations in Africa.

In its second policy document on Africa, issued in 2015, China emphasises both its own role as a security actor in Africa and the need to consolidate institutional security cooperation: 'It [China] will implement the Initiative on China–Africa Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Security and continue to provide, within its capabilities, support to Africa for its development of collective security mechanisms such as the African Standby Force and the African Capacity for Immediate Response to Crises.'<sup>70</sup> However, bilateral military cooperation has remained a focus of China's engagement: 'China will further strengthen military exchanges and cooperation with African countries. ... It will continue to help African countries enhance their capacity building in national defense and peacekeeping to safeguard their own security and regional peace.'<sup>71</sup>

This focus on state security capabilities also reflects the reality of Chinese military cooperation on the continent, which is predominantly based on bilateral partnerships. Despite the continued dominance of state-to-state cooperation, new structures and institutions have emerged. Fifteen years after China's first steps towards interregional security arrangements with the AU, institutionalised structures range from 'soft' confidence-building measures and preventive diplomacy to specific conflict-resolution mechanisms and direct military support. A central aspect is formed by various established dialogue and consultation mechanisms between Beijing and the AU headquarters in Addis Ababa. In addition to support at the multilateral and diplomatic level, China is increasingly recognising the AU's role in active conflict resolution and has repeatedly shown its willingness to support the collective African security mechanisms through concrete measures.

China's direct contribution to the AU security architecture has, however, been relatively moderate by international standards and limited to singular, often event-related support.

Only the two AU or hybrid AU/UN missions in Sudan (AMIS/UNAMID) and in Somalia (AMISOM) and the African Standby Force (ASF) have received notable support.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>68</sup>Nantulya, 'Considerations for a prospective naval base.'

<sup>69</sup>Cao and Noesselt, 'Political settlement', p. 14.

<sup>70</sup>'China's Africa policy' (2015), available at: {[http://www.china.org.cn/world/2015-12/05/content\\_37241677.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/world/2015-12/05/content_37241677.htm)}.

<sup>71</sup>China, 'China's Africa policy' (2015), sec. 6.2.

<sup>72</sup>Lammich, 'Stability through multilateral cooperation', p. 115.

At the FOCAC meeting in 2012, in which the AU participated as a regular member for the first time, a package of security-related measures was adopted. The Chinese side announced the launch of the Initiative on China–Africa Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Security (ICACPPS), in which, according to the founding declaration, China should regularly exchange views with African foreign ministries not only on issues of joint strategy for military missions, but also on sensitive topics such as criteria and norms for intervention. Since its official launch in 2012, the precise structure of ICACPPS has remained unclear. Moreover, aside from a brief mention at the 2015 FOCAC summit, official sources have offered few details about this partnership. However, other more substantial commitments have been made, such as financial support for AU peacekeeping missions and the development of the ASF, as well as additional training for AU peacekeepers and security experts. In September 2015, President Xi announced that China would provide US\$100 million in ‘military assistance’ to the AU over four years to support the establishment of the African Standby Force and its interim mechanism, the African Capacity for Immediate Response to Crises (ACIRC). Two months later, at the 2015 FOCAC Summit in Johannesburg, China reaffirmed its pledge to support the AU’s peace and security capacities and increased its financial commitments by a further US\$60 million to support the ASF and ACIRC.<sup>73</sup>

China is deepening its security partnership with the AU, notably operationalising the China–Africa Peace and Security Initiative and the China–Africa Peace and Security Fund, both announced in 2018. Through this partnership, Beijing is pledging support to the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) and African Standby Force (ASF). APSA’s subsidiary structure points towards greater cooperation with Africa’s Regional Economic Communities (RECs), APSA’s subregional building blocks.<sup>74</sup>

The China–Africa Defense and Security Forum (CADSF), which took place in September 2018 in Beijing, with the participation of delegations from 49 national governments and the AU, is another example of the institutionalisation and militarisation of Sino–African security cooperation. The forum, which was chaired by Hu Changming (head of the Office for International Military Cooperation of the PLA), discussed issues of regional security and future cooperation. Unlike the Initiative on China–Africa Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Security, the format is not geared to the political sector but rather the military sector.<sup>75</sup> Just one year later, Beijing rebranded the summit and hosted the first China–Africa Peace and Security Forum (CAPSF), targeting a similar audience of representatives from the defence departments, high-ranking military personnel, and AU security staff.<sup>76</sup> While some experts argued that the name change from Defense Forum to Peace Forum signalled a shift in Beijing’s priorities on the continent, it is also likely that it was simply a response to critics who called the 2018 forum a military trade show for Chinese-made weapons. Whatever the reasons for relaunching the forum, the new name seems to have been satisfactory, and the second China–Africa Peace and Security Forum was held online in 2022, attended by the Chinese defence minister Wei Fenghe and 50 ministers and senior representatives from the African Union (AU) and African countries. While the ICACPPS laid the groundwork for regional peace and security efforts, the CADSF signaled a deeper institutionalisation and a more regularised channel for dialogue and training, even if the regional dimension was less pronounced. In 2023, the CAPSF was identified as one of the key international dialogue platforms in China’s GSI concept paper.

Whereas the three FOCAC summits from 2012 to 2018 introduced several new security initiatives, momentum slowed significantly due to the impact of Covid-19 and more restrictive funding

<sup>73</sup>China–Africa factsheet, South African Institute of International Affairs (2017), p. 8, available at: <https://www.saiia.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/China-Africa-Factsheet.pdf>.

<sup>74</sup>China and Africa: Strengthening friendship, solidarity and cooperation for a new era of common development 2022, available at: [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjlb/wjlbz/jh/202405/t20240527\\_11312260.html](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjlb/wjlbz/jh/202405/t20240527_11312260.html).

<sup>75</sup>China–Africa defense, security forum opens in Beijing, China Military (27 June 2018), available at: [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-06/27/content\\_8071089.htm](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-06/27/content_8071089.htm).

<sup>76</sup>Overview of 1st China–Africa Peace and Security Forum, available at: [http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News\\_213114/TopStories/4846012.html](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/4846012.html).

patterns in China's engagement with Africa. Although President Xi Jinping highlighted peace and security as a priority at the 2021 FOCAC summit in Dakar, commitments in this area were fewer than in previous years. During this period, Chinese representatives largely reiterated earlier pledges and emphasised past meetings and dialogues.

In a shift from this relative stagnation, the Chinese Ministry of Defence hosted the third China–Africa Peace and Security Forum in Beijing from 28 August to 2 September 2023, bringing together 100 military officials, heads of peace and security affairs from the African Union, and military attachés from various African nations. In addition to the main forum, new specialised platforms emerged, including the Conference on Military Medicine and the Military Education Seminar under the China–Africa Peace and Security Forum. These developments signalled China's renewed emphasis on institutionalising dialogue, building capacity, and strengthening security collaboration leading up to the 2024 summit.

In early September 2024, China welcomed 53 high-level African delegations – 36 led by heads of state and prime ministers – to the ninth FOCAC summit in Beijing. The expanded military and security agenda outlined in the FOCAC Beijing Action Plan, along with prominent references to China's Global Development, Security, and Civilisation Initiatives, further underscored a recalibration of China's broader geopolitical strategy.<sup>77</sup>

Outside FOCAC and other structured dialogues – for example, in the context of trips to Africa by Chinese politicians or in the run-up to important meetings – China regularly reaffirms its support for the AU as a security actor through new measures and financial and technical assistance.

In addition to direct financial and logistical support of the AU security architecture, China contributes indirectly to the military capacity of the AU by tying bilateral agreements on 'military aid' in some cases to the participation of the respective states in AU peacekeeping missions. For example, China has substantiated its support for the military apparatus of various countries, including South Africa, Tanzania, Burundi, Nigeria, and Uganda, with their regional engagement and participation in REC and AU security structures.<sup>78</sup> The massive expansion of Chinese military cooperation in recent years and formats such as the CADSF/CAPSE, however, seem to be largely independent of the regional engagement of the African states and follow different strategic interests.

While the military capacities of the AU in recent years certainly benefited from China's support, Chinese engagement is not tied to a specific long-term programme or concept and is therefore rather erratic and difficult to predict.<sup>79</sup> Unlike the United States, for example, which has made firm financial commitments for the development of an African security architecture embedded in long-term framework programmes such as the Global Peace Operations Initiative (GPOI), China has made only a few concrete commitments in corresponding framework documents. Although at the Beijing Summit of the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation in September 2018 China announced the decision to launch the China–Africa Peace and Security Fund for increasing support to the ASF and ACIRC, the fund has not been implemented four years later, and no further details have been publicised about its status. Technical and financial support often reflects current developments in Chinese (foreign) policy or is issued in the context of major events such as the FOCAC meetings or top-level visits of Chinese politicians to the AU. For example, China's participation in the AU mission in Darfur can be interpreted as a reaction to increasing international criticism of the close relationship between Beijing and Khartoum. Similarly, China's participation in AMISOM can be understood as a direct attempt to protect Chinese trade routes. This strongly reactive and flexible strategy prevents the African Union from calculating and planning with Chinese support for long-term capacity development and the consolidation of a regional security infrastructure. The 2023 GSI concept paper recognises this and states one of its goals as supporting the provision of

<sup>77</sup> Forum on China–Africa Cooperation Beijing Action Plan (2025–2027) (17 July 2019), available at: [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/zyxw/t20240905\\_11485719.html](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/zyxw/t20240905_11485719.html)].

<sup>78</sup> Lammich, 'Stability through multilateral cooperation'.

<sup>79</sup> Lammich, 'Stability through multilateral cooperation'.



'sufficient, predictable and sustainable financial assistance to the African Union (AU) for it to carry out autonomous peacekeeping operations.'<sup>80</sup>

When examining the full range of security-related forums, exercises, and initiatives China has established in Africa, it remains unclear which measures fit into a cohesive strategic framework and which ones are more incidental. The discontinuation of certain initiatives – such as the ICACPPS – along with the rebranding of the CADSF and the ad hoc support for the ASF and other regional programmes suggests that not all Chinese security activities have produced the desired outcomes.

On the other hand, the interconnections between joint exercises, military training, Chinese-built infrastructure, and arms sales indicate that these efforts cannot simply be viewed as isolated events. At the policy level, the inclusion of China's three diplomatic initiatives – the Global Development, Security, and Civilisation Initiatives – into the FOCAC agenda and their linkage to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) points to a more holistic and long-term strategic vision. Through these frameworks, China has constructed a coherent policy approach to integrate Africa into its geostrategic ambitions.

While China has attempted to leverage the 2023 China–Africa Peace and Security Forum and the 2024 FOCAC summit to promote its GSI as an alternative narrative to the Western-led international order, the reception in Africa has been mixed. Certain GSI principles – for example, the emphasis on resolving disputes through consultation and mediation rather than intervention, and avoiding unilateral sanctions or collective confrontations – echo long-standing African preferences for diplomacy and non-interference. Likewise, the prospect of financial and technical support for security-sector capacity building generally draws positive responses. Nevertheless, the GSI has yet to replace or substantially influence the established concepts favoured by African elites.<sup>81</sup> Instead of embracing the GSI wholesale, African policymakers often adopt its elements selectively, strategically integrating those aspects that serve their immediate interests. This pragmatic engagement helps them balance their relations with both China and the West, reflecting a transactional approach aimed at reinforcing their sovereign decision-making.

The challenges of forging a cohesive African stance on the GSI – or any other external security framework – are exacerbated by emerging geopolitical dynamics, notably the resurgence of Russia as a security actor on the continent and a spate of military coups in the Sahel. These developments further fracture an already-diverse continent, complicating efforts to craft common security policies or uniform guidelines for engaging external partners. Although Africa theoretically possesses a range of institutional mechanisms to coordinate its positions, the reality is more fragmented. The continent's 55 states often hold sharply divergent views and occasionally form only ad hoc coalitions rather than cohesive blocs.<sup>82</sup> While the African Union (AU) regards peace and security as a core principle and its Commission holds some degree of independent agency, no clear, unified African strategy for security cooperation with China has emerged. In this environment, selective adaptation of external initiatives like the GSI is likely to remain the norm, rather than the exception.

## Conclusion

Under President Xi, China has begun to articulate a more assertive vision of how global security governance should evolve, but China's future as a security provider in Africa remains uncertain. The GSI and related documents provide the policy foundation for a more vigorous approach by Chinese actors on the continent, and various dialogue structures offer platforms for Beijing to shape its image as an active peace broker. Despite Beijing's turn towards greater *realpolitik*, its

<sup>80</sup> Global Security Initiative Concept Paper (full text) 全球安全倡议概念文件(全文) [Quánqíú ānquán chàngyì gàiniàn wénjiàn (quánwén)], available at: [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjbxw\\_new/202302/t20230221\\_11028322.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjbxw_new/202302/t20230221_11028322.shtml)].

<sup>81</sup> Lammich, 'Lost in transfer'.

<sup>82</sup> Philani Mthembu and Faith Mabera (eds), *Africa–China Cooperation: Towards an African Policy on China?* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

evolving institutional framework, and its adjusted self-image, Chinese security activism in Africa remains deeply rooted in the principles of non-interference and respect for national sovereignty.

The complex situation in many parts of Africa riddled with insecurity and transnational conflicts makes it necessary for China to give up its rigorous stance on traditional foreign policy principles to protect its strategic interests in the region. Even if China has found a new appetite for crisis diplomacy and military cooperation, frameworks such as the GSI are limited to resolving disputes between sovereign countries but offer no new guidance on how to intervene in domestic conflicts. China has yet to find a convincing interpretation of its great power status for the realities of conflicts in Africa, which often arise from internal challenges and religious and inter-ethnic tensions fuelled by cross-border arms proliferation and violence. By associating itself with multilateral actors and launching diplomatic interventions that are officially endorsed by all participating states, China seeks to circumvent an apparent contradiction between interference and non-intervention. Although China is in principle willing to move beyond 'resource diplomacy' to a more comprehensive approach to engaging the continent, for the time being Beijing shuns a decisive strategy that it associates with Western interventionism. Instead, China has emphasised the importance of respecting the sovereignty of African countries and supporting their own security mechanisms, rather than imposing external solutions on the continent. Much will depend on how China's economic and strategic interests in Africa evolve in the coming years, as well as on the willingness of African countries to engage with China as a security partner. In theory, China has several options for expanding its security footprint, ranging from greater support for regional initiatives and increased participation in peacekeeping operations to direct military cooperation or even the establishment of new military bases in strategic locations. However, China is likely to be cautious about assuming a more significant role in regional security governance in Africa, aware that a more assertive approach could alienate African partners, provoke a backlash from other external actors, and exacerbate tensions in the region. The most likely direction may involve a more targeted and selective approach to engagement in security-related initiatives, based on China's own assessments of the risks and benefits involved.

**Funding statement.** This research was part of the ChiTA (China and the Transformation of Political Order in Africa) project, funded by the DFG. Project number: 469144017. For more information, visit <https://www.chita-duisburg.org>.

**Dr Georg Lammich** is a senior researcher in International Relations at the University of Duisburg-Essen, Germany. Website: [https://www.uni-due.de/politik/lammich\\_eng.php](https://www.uni-due.de/politik/lammich_eng.php).